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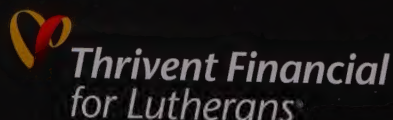
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THE BIG QUESTIONS

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VOICES

The Hard Questions

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

A few years ago, I saw a poster: “Growing old isn’t for sissies.” True, I thought, rubbing an arthritic knee. It takes fortitude. Lately I am reminded of that poster as I think, “Bible study isn’t for wimps.”

Lutheran women have a rich heritage of Bible study. We know that it helps us grow in faith and strengthens our relationship with God and each other. The Bible guides us and comforts us, yes, but it also challenges us.

Last May, some of our staff attended the *LWT* Bible study introduction at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. Terry and Faith Fretheim, writers of the new study, “Hope in God in Times of Suffering,” and 150 participants reviewed all nine sessions. The Fretheims told us that we all go through times of suffering—it’s something we have in common. But they challenged us with this: What will you *do* with your suffering?

This study doesn’t skirt the hard questions: Why do we suffer? Where is God when we suffer? When we grapple with such questions, we can experience hope in God in deeper ways. Then we can share that hope with others.

Some of the hardest questions come out of natural disaster. In “Hurricane Katrina: One Year Later,” Michael D. Nevergall tells how Lutherans are responding to the suffering that followed last year’s storms. Recovery means both physical and emotional rebuilding, and Lutheran Disaster Response is there for the long haul.

One of the best ways we can support people in times of trouble is by sharing


God’s presence through our own presence. Sister Sally Kerr, a member of the ELCA Deaconess Community, gives hands-on help at a home for abused children. She says, “If the people I work with walk away knowing that God is in their hearts, then I have done my job.”

Feeling God’s caring presence during times of suffering can be difficult. Gwen Sayler tells how her mother found peace when she was dying of cancer by learning to tell God how she really felt and by “breathing into the questions she had feared to ask for so long.”

Martha Stortz faces this hard question: How can good come from suffering? In “The Good that Comes,” Stortz assures us that “God suffers with us. That may not seem like enough—but death is not the last word. God’s final word is the Easter proclamation: ‘He is risen!’”

It’s one thing to know the Easter proclamation—it’s another to know what to say when a friend is living her own Good Friday. In “What to Say,” Pastor Christa von Zychlin finds out what words her women’s Bible study group found helpful (or not) when they were having tough times. Read her article for ideas on how to be more sensitive when someone you know is struggling.

Finally, check out our new column, “Let Us Pray.” In upcoming issues, Debra Farrington will offer ideas and resources to enhance your prayer life.

As always, we hope this issue of *LWT* inspires you on your faith journey. 
Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

The Teaching Voice

Marj Leegard

The image of the little boy Jesus in the temple at the feet of the teachers is the perfect picture of questioning. But Jesus is not asking first; he is listening. In Luke 2:46 (CEV) it says, "Three days later they found Jesus sitting in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions."

That is not my mode of operation. Me? Listen first? I explode with questions first. Teachers are all around but I am more intent on pushing my questions in every direction. I ask questions to vent my anger and my accusations. Deep inside, I know that I cannot expect all my questions to be answered to my satisfaction the very moment I ask them. The serpent in the Eden garden dangled the promise of that gift before Adam and Eve. And I demand no less.

As my questions begin to overwhelm me, I find that I am not alone. Now I can hear the voices of my teachers. They have been there and they will be there. I finally hear those voices across the chasm of doubt.

Were you the one who brought banana bread and told me that you understood, and that you had been in this dark place?

Were you the one who told me not to look for answers today, just to bear my grief for now? That is more than enough and you helped me do that. You reminded me that there would be time in eternity to ask the questions and seek the answers.

Were you the one who said, "You're a writer!?" forgetting that you were the one who set me on that course long ago? You

may have forgotten that scrap of paper but your teaching word nudges me on.

Were you the delightful young person who said, "I want to be just like you when I'm old"? That was the answer to a question I hadn't asked aloud, but it settled an inner query for me.

Where do we find those voices? These teachers who speak above the noise of our questions, these teachers who listen?

The voices find us. They are near us. Sometimes they speak out at the circle Bible study. They are in the Sunday school classes. They are called teachers and fellow students. They speak from the pulpit and from the aisle. We hear them in the anthem. They are in the tattered poem and in the book we are reading. They are in the devotions for the day. They sit beside us when we are rejoicing and wonder whether we deserve such joy. They sit beside us when we are weeping and are very sure we don't deserve such sorrow. They write little notes on cards and long letters and they send us e-mail. They are close, so close that we are astounded to learn that we have been teaching voices as well. We do not know how many questions we have quieted by our daily lives, living out our faith. We only know that if we listen, the Holy Spirit will teach.

When the questions come, listen for the teaching voice. And let yourself be the teaching voice for the questions around you. 🌸

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



Hurricane Katrina

ONE YEAR LATER

by Michael D. Nevergall

“They give up their vacation time and spend their hard-earned money to get here. Then they sleep on a floor or in a tent, and get up every morning to spend 12 hours shoveling muck out of houses. And not the houses of their neighbors or friends, mind you, but complete strangers. And to top it off, at the end of their time, they say ‘Thank you so much for this opportunity,’ and they leave with tears in their eyes. Can you believe it?”

Donna has a hard time believing it, as she tells anyone who asks. Donna lives in southern Mississippi. After Hurricane Katrina damaged her home and left her jobless, she began working for Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) in Biloxi.



A volunteer cleans up a house damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

One of Donna’s duties is helping to schedule volunteer service groups, and she is amazed that they just keep coming.

Even in the midst of a new hurricane season, we cannot forget the devastation of a year ago. It is predicted that the rebuilding process in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina,

Rita, and Wilma will take as long as 10 years. Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) continues to serve those affected through the four core components of disaster ministry: spiritual and emotional care, hardship grants, volunteer coordination, and long-term rebuilding.

Spiritual and emotional care

The first core component of LDR’s ministry is meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of those affected. This includes both the disaster survivors and those who provide care and support to survivors. In addition to the standing LDR spiritual and emotional care committee, a team of disaster-certified chaplains is on call to be deployed in ministry

to survivors and volunteers and to relieve local clergy.

Lutheran Disaster Response has a special concern for the needs of children affected by disaster. Camp Noah, a program of Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota supported by LDR, helps children process their fears through Bible lessons and games. Camp Noah held nearly 100 week-long camps this summer in communities along the Gulf Coast.

Hardship grants

In the time immediately following disaster, LDR provides financial assistance to individuals, regardless of religious affiliation, through hardship grants. These grants help cover everyday costs such as housing, transportation, food, child care, and utilities, allowing survivors some security as they work to recover. More than \$300,000 in hardship grants has already been distributed to families along the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina. Fifteen congregations also received hardship grants.

Volunteer coordination

The volunteer response to Hurricane Katrina has been amazing, and groups from around the country continue to plan work trips for the months and years to come. In the six months after the storm, Lutheran Disaster Response coordinated more than 400,000 hours

of volunteer service along the Gulf Coast, the equivalent of more than \$7 million of donated time. In partnership with local affiliates, LDR has established more than a dozen volunteer housing sites in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. These “camps” provide a place for

volunteers to stay, eat, and receive their work assignments.

A highlight of the volunteer effort was the “What a Relief!” drive, the first LDR alternative spring break for college students.

In March 2006, nearly 1,100 students representing 54 U.S. colleges and universities traveled to the Gulf Coast and Florida for an intense week of volunteer work. The students were organized by campus pastors, Lutheran campus ministry sites, and community service organizations. To learn about assembling a work crew from your congregations or community, visit www.ldr.org.

Long-term recovery

Lutheran Disaster Response is committed to the long-term recovery of

the hurricane-affected areas.

Long-term recovery means both physical and emotional rebuilding. While volunteers work to clean up and rebuild homes, Lutheran Disaster Response also employs case managers to help survivors as they navigate post-disaster paper-

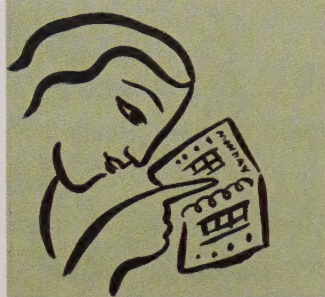
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work and other practical issues. In late 2005, LDR was named as one of nine grantees in “Katrina Aid Today,” a case management consortium administered by the United Methodist Committee on Relief, FEMA, and the U.S. Department for Homeland Security.

Since Hurricane Katrina, more than \$24 million has been generously given to the response efforts. By the end of 2006, approximately \$18 million will have been disbursed to the LDR affiliates responding.

Your contributions to disaster relief have made a difference in the lives of people in difficult and sometimes desperate situations. 🙏

Michael D. Nevergall is associate for program interpretation with Lutheran Disaster Response.



CALENDAR NOTES

September

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including *Renewing
Worship, Sundays and Seasons*, and
Lutheran Book of Worship, published
by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers
(www.augsburgfortress.org)

September always feels like the beginning of a new year, doesn't it? In the Jewish calendar, it is. This year, our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate Rosh Hashanah September 22–24.

4 Albert Schweitzer, missionary

This Lutheran clergyman was a brilliant musician and scholar. In 1905, he read an article about medical missionaries and realized that that was his calling. He later wrote, "My new occupation would be not to talk about the gospel of love, but to put it into practice." He began building a hospital in Gabon, Western Africa, in 1913. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952 (he used the prize money to add a leprosarium to the hospital), and died on this date in 1965.

9 Peter Claver, missionary

This Spanish Jesuit could not end the slave trade to South America in the early 1600s, but he worked hard to ease the misery of those who were brought there in chains. He believed that service was as effective as the most eloquent sermon: "We must speak to people with our hands before we try to speak to them with our lips." He died in 1654.

13 John Chrysostom, bishop

So eloquent that he was nicknamed "golden mouth," John was elected bishop of Constantinople. His predecessor lived like a prince; John toned that down and used the excess to serve the poor. His bold humility earned him the love of the people. He died in the year 407.

14 Holy Cross Day

On this date in the year 335, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, located within the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, was dedicated. It stands over the place where the Empress Helena found what she believed to be (and might actually be) the site of Christ's crucifixion and burial. On this day we celebrate the saving cross with joy. You might read 1 Corinthians 1:18–24, today's appointed epistle, for your daily devotions.

16 Cyprian, bishop, martyr

This North African bishop served during persecution, plague, schism, and yet more persecution. He never wavered in his faith and was martyred for it in the year 258.

17 Hildegard of Bingen, abbess

This medieval mystic wrote music, poems, songs, hymns, treatises on medicine, letters to popes and princes, and three volumes describing and interpreting her visions. In between, she toured France and Germany preaching. This bold woman described music as the means of recapturing the joy and beauty of paradise. She died in 1179.

18 Dag Hammarskjöld, renewer of society

General Secretary of the United Nations during the darkest years of the arms race and the Cold War, this Swedish diplomat relied on his deep faith, unknown to the world until after his death on this date in 1961. The book *Markings* is his spiritual autobiography.

11 Matthew, apostle, evangelist

The tax collector who left his booth to follow Jesus has long been believed to have written this Gospel. Modern scholars suggest that he was the source of many of the traditions the writer used, and that the writer also drew from the Gospel of Mark. But no matter who actually held the pen, the book makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is the promised Messiah. You might read today's appointed Gospel, Matthew 9:9–13, for your devotions.

18 Jehu Jones, missionary

In 1832, this South Carolina native became the Lutheran church's first African American pastor, ordained in New York.

19 Michael and All Angels

The Scripture mentions angels as messengers who worship God in heaven. Two of today's readings (Daniel 10:10–14, 12:1–3; Revelation 12:7–12) name Michael as the protector of the people and the one who leads the hosts of heaven against Satan. He is often depicted in art as a warrior angel defeating the devil.

20 Jerome, translator, theologian

In the late fourth century, many Christians couldn't understand the Bible because they spoke Latin, not Hebrew or Greek. Jerome translated the Scripture into everyday Latin, not literary Latin. His Vulgate (common) Bible was the standard text for Christians for more than 1,000 years. 🌸

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A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

by Anne Keffer

The Deaconess Community of the ELCA hasn't been the same since Sister Sally Kerr arrived on her motorcycle nearly 40 years ago. Whether working with underprivileged students from some of Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods or tending her flock of students and animals at Silver Springs—Martin Luther School in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, Sister Sally does things her own way. Sister Sally's story is heart-warming, inspiring and unforgettable—anything but ordinary.

The big book

Sally Kerr's story begins in rural Petersburg, Ohio, where her family of five brothers and two sisters represented a good portion of the town's 300 residents. "I was the youngest of eight, so I learned early to fend for myself," says Sally.

Growing up in such a small community, for Sally church was an integral part of her family. By the age of 10, she decided on some form of vocation within the church.

It took just two more years for that desire to take form.

"When I was 12, I was walking between classes and took a shortcut through the guidance counselor's office," Sally remembers. "There I saw the biggest book I had ever seen in my life, so I opened it up and the first word I saw was *deaconess*." Unsure what the word meant, the young Sally went home and asked her mother what a deaconess was. "She read me the description and,

right then, I decided I was going to be a deaconess."

After high school, Kerr entered Youngstown State University in Ohio. "I only enrolled because at that time, a college degree was required to become a deaconess." She graduated with a bachelor of science degree in education, and left the next day for the Deaconess Center, then the residence of deaconesses in training and retired deaconesses in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania.

Learning to teach

Sally spent her first year living at the Deaconess Center—also known as the Mother House—surrounded by sisters who mentored her faith. “For the first time I was able to talk openly and analytically about my faith with like-minded people,” said Sally. “Once I was at the center, it was clear that the Deaconess Community was where I was meant to be.”

After her year at the Deaconess Center and newly invested by the community, Sister Sally was ready for new endeavors. Her passion for education and love of theological questions led her to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where she earned a master’s degree in religion.

Sister Sally spent the next five years teaching in inner-city Lutheran parochial schools in and around Philadelphia. Her experience of teaching underprivileged students stuck with Sister Sally, and would eventually lead her to Silver Springs–Martin Luther, another Lutheran school in Pennsylvania.

In 1978, Sister Sally took a position as a mental-health worker at Silver Springs–Martin Luther school, a residential home for abused children between the ages of 6 and 14. Soon after, she enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania’s doctoral program in instruction and curriculum.

“When it came time for my dissertation, I knew I wanted to find some way to combine what I was doing at Silver Springs with what I was learning in my doctoral program,” says Sister Sally. “I decided to write a program for spiritual education tailored toward abused children.”

Life on the farm

Upon receiving her doctorate in 1983, Sister Sally accepted a full-time position at Silver Springs. For the children (95 percent of whom come from mental institutions), Silver Springs is often the last hope in a series of foster homes. “Generally, we take the children who no one else wants and show them that God loves them,” said Sister Sally. “We currently have 72 children, and, sadly, have a waiting list of many more.”

The school’s 36-acre campus and its open-minded CEO, Ruth W. Bartelt, have enabled Sister Sally to start several unique programs.

“I have always felt that spiritual and religious education should not be taught in isolation. So one of the first things I did upon arriving at Silver Springs was to start a companion animal program.” The program started with a few chickens and goats. Kerr’s thinking behind the companion animal program was that abused children would learn to be kinder and gentler by caring for the animals. “We wanted to end the

cycle of violence that the children were caught up in.”

Soon Silver Springs had a collection of animals that would make even Noah proud. “We now have chickens, goats, birds, fish, rabbits, geese, and sheep,” Sister Sally says proudly.

Sophie the Wonder Dog

Of all the animals at Silver Springs, perhaps none is more famous than Sister Sally’s dog, Sophie. The Shetland sheepdog is a nationally certified therapy dog. Ever since Sophie came to the farm, she and Sister Sally have been almost inseparable. “We are so intertwined that students often call the dog Sally and me Sister Sophie.”

Sophie’s many talents include singing and consoling depressed students. “I can remember one time, a student was crying and Sophie came up to the girl and started to lick away her tears. The girl then laid down next to Sophie and fell asleep while sucking her thumb and twirling Sophie’s hair.”

The power of her message

With her experience, enthusiasm, and knowledge, it is no surprise that Sister Sally is a very popular speaker. There are countless stories of people wanting to be around her, like the local rabbi who made sure his daughter took Sister Sally’s workshops because of his respect

for her inclusive teaching methods. Perhaps the best example of the power of Sister Sally's message is the action of an elderly woman who heard her speak only once. When the woman died, she left \$300,000 to Silver Springs because she was so moved by what Sister Sally had to say.

Professor Sally

In 1999 Sister Sally added yet another activity to her busy schedule—she began teaching at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadel-

phia. "The most popular course I teach there is centered around helping the students create their own curriculum," said Sister Sally. "By the time the semester is over, I guarantee the students will have at least two courses—and the idea for another—that they are prepared to bring back to their parishes."

According to Sister Sally, "If the people I work with walk away knowing that God is in their hearts, then I have done my job." Her passion for working with children and

spreading God's love transcends age, religion, and social barriers. With the enthusiasm of a cheerleader, the devotion of a nun, and a little help from Sophie the Wonder Dog, Sister Sally has done the impossible: She has turned kids other people thought were hopeless into hopeful young people who have experienced the power of God's love. 🌿

Sister Anne Keffer is the directing deaconess for the Deaconess Community of the ELCA, and is also the official spokesperson for the Community.

Founded in Germany in 1884, the Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Church in America (ELCA) is a community of lay women consecrated by the church to a ministry of word and service. Sisters in the community work in a variety of settings such as health care, Christian education, and social services. Deaconesses are theologically trained and professionally prepared for their careers. They are called to ministry by congregations and synods of the ELCA and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). For more information on the Deaconess Community, contact Sister Anne Keffer at 800-638-3522 ext.1705 or by e-mail at anne.keffer@elca.org.

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LET US PRAY

A Place Filled with Prayer

by Debra K. Farrington

Welcome to our new column on prayer. If you're looking for some ways to enliven your prayer life, or you're just curious about the myriad ways to pray, this column is for you. Each month I'll suggest a practice to either jump-start or deepen your prayer life. I'll also suggest some resources for more information on the practice. Some of these ways to pray will speak to you; others won't. I invite you to use what's helpful to you and not worry about the rest.

One way to enrich your prayer life is to arrange a prayer corner or room, a special place for your times of prayer. Have you ever walked into a church, especially an old one, and had the sense that the space was filled with people's prayers? That's what you'll create with your prayer space: a place filled with your prayers. As you pray in it over time, you'll develop something like what athletes call muscle memory. Athletes train by repeating a move over and over, so that their bodies will remember it even in stressful, high-pressure situations.

Something similar happens with prayer. If we have a place where we are accustomed to praying, a sort of spiritual muscle memory kicks in, and we fall into prayer more easily there.

Setting up a prayer corner is simple. Find a place that feels calm and quiet to you. If you can, choose a spot away from phones and interruptions. Put a comfortable chair or pillow and a small table or shelf in your space. Make the space peaceful and beautiful; put a pretty cloth over the table, for example, or

place a bowl of flowers there. Then add a few items of spiritual significance. That might include books (your Bible, prayer books, devotional reading), and perhaps some objects (a cross, an icon, prayer beads, works of art).

Many people add photos or mementos of people they want to remember in prayer or objects that remind them of the sacred season. For example, a small picture of the infant Jesus with his mother Mary would be perfect for Advent and Christmas. Objects from nature can remind us of God's good creation. A candle, a plant, a tabletop water fountain, and even a small CD player and some favorite CDs can be good additions to your prayer space.

And that's it. You've got a prayer corner. Use this space for prayer often—daily, if possible. Go to it, sit in your comfortable chair, and prayerfully read Scripture or engage in whatever type of prayer is comfortable for you. You may not notice it at first, but over time your spirit will know what this place is for and will settle into prayer quickly and easily there.

Resources:

Here are two wonderful prayer books to consider keeping in your prayer corner.

- *Soul Weavings: A Gathering of Women's Prayers*, edited by Lyn Klug (Augsburg Books)
- *2000 Years of Prayer*, compiled by Michael Counsell (Morehouse Publishing) 🌸

Debra K. Farrington is the author of eight books on Christian spirituality. She is a popular retreat leader and speaker. Her Web site is www.debrafarrington.com.



WHAT TO SAY

by Christa von Zychlin

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. *Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, 7b*

Years ago, when I was a very young pastor, I stood nervously at the funeral visitation for an elderly gentleman, wondering what I could say that might help ease the family's grief. Streams of people filed by the open casket and greeted the widow. One particular woman was clearly struggling to come up with something helpful to say. "Oh!" she exclaimed, looking at the body and then back to the widow, "Why, you know, he looks just wonderful, so much better than he did at your golden wedding anniversary!"

To borrow from the title of Judith Viorst's children's book: sometimes the only thing you can do is laugh when somebody responds to your pain with a "terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad" thing to say.

But what *should* we say? How should we respond when someone is grieving the death of a family member, facing trouble with a child, going through a divorce, or otherwise suffering?

A TIME TO KEEP SILENCE

Surprisingly, the best first response to a friend's pain could be to say very little. It might be no accident that in the book of Ecclesiastes (part of the well-named wisdom literature of our Bible) the sequence is *first* a time for keeping silence, and then a time for speaking.

I recently asked my women's Bible study group what they found helpful when they were going through tough times. Marci, a teacher, told about when her daughter, a troubled and troublesome teen, was picked up by the police for

possession of marijuana. The call came on a Thursday, and on Friday morning her daughter moved out, "never to live under our roof again," Marci said. That morning, she posted a memo at school telling her colleagues the news and that she was too close to tears to discuss it, but would appreciate their smiles. "One of the teachers met me outside the school office, gave me a hug, and handed me a bunch of balloons, without saying one word. It meant everything to me."

In the beginning of the book of Job (another wisdom book), Job's friends come to console him after several tragedies. They don't help him much with their long speeches, but have you ever noticed what these friends do before they start talking? They sit with Job in silence for seven days (Job 2:11-13)!

In the Jewish tradition, people “sit *shiva*” after the death of a relative. The word *shiva* comes from the Hebrew word for seven, and sitting *shiva* means seven days of quiet mourning. During this time friends may pay a *shiva* call. The emphasis of these visits is not on speaking, but on listening to the mourner and quiet remembrance and reflection. The important part is being there with the mourner, not trying to distract her or “fix it.”

It can be healing to allow a person to focus on her sadness, to take it seriously and not try to wipe it away. As Christians we know that it is God’s job to wipe tears away. It’s foolish to think that it’s ours. Foolish and presumptuous and often downright irritating. “I wanted to slug her,” said another woman. “I was a little girl and my favorite uncle had passed away. At the funeral my aunt told me I shouldn’t cry, that it was wrong of me to cry. I was so mad at her for trying to make me ashamed of my tears.”

The group remembered that Jesus himself cried at the death of Lazarus. Why then should we try to keep a grieving friend’s tears away?

Many of the “no-good, very bad” things people blurt out to grieving friends seem to come from speaking without thinking. Well-meaning Christians can be among the worst offenders. My friend Kayli described how her pastor “warbled on and on”

about the resurrection at her mother’s deathbed. The pastor’s timing was off. “I do believe in the resurrection,” she told me, “but it wasn’t helpful to feel this pressure to be a ‘faithful’ person and be rushed from Good Friday right into Easter.”

Allowing time for grieving is an important part of the wisdom of women I have spoken with. At the death of Jesus himself, there was a full day of God’s silence (that second day, a Sabbath) before God

The emphasis is not on speaking, but on listening

spoke the resurrection into being.

Worse comments include the “Christian” friend who told the mother of a man who died of AIDS “how sorry I am that your son won’t be going to heaven since he was gay.” Whatever her honest beliefs about sexual orientation might be, does *her* Bible not include Jesus’ words, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged”? Does *her* Bible not include Apostle Paul’s words about comforting others “with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4b)?

People agreed whole-heartedly that the least appreciated Bible passage people can say in times of grief

is, “God gives you only as much as you can handle.” This is actually not a Bible verse at all—it’s a misquotation of Paul’s carefully constructed statement in 1 Corinthians 10:13. There is real meaning in that text, but Paul surely is not trying to tell us God heaps trouble on people just to show their spiritual strength!

A comment that women who have suffered miscarriage almost unanimously hate is, “you’ll have other children.” But one woman who had lost a baby in her third month of pregnancy beamed as she told us what her parish mothers’ group had done. “They remembered my due date and when I came to church that night for our meeting, they surprised me with the sweetest bouquet of white and yellow daisies. Of course, I cried. We all did, but it was such a good kind of cry.”

A TIME TO SPEAK

There is a time for silence, but there is also a time to voice concern.

My husband, Wayne, recalls his parents’ misery in their marriage, including struggles with alcoholism, hospitalization, and bankruptcy. Through all those years, both parents were active in church life. Their troubles must have been apparent to other church members. Wayne recalls when his mother finally told her church friends that she was getting a divorce. “Oh,” said one long-

standing fellow parishioner. "Well, we've all been thinking there's been something wrong."

"A lot of help that was," my husband says. "You wonder what might have happened if somebody would have said something to my mom or dad years earlier, even just to let them know that they could count on those people there at church."

Those are almost exactly the words Elise, a mother of two, found most helpful as her own marriage was ending. "I had friends who said, 'whatever you decide, I will support you, and I will be there for you.' I took a lot of comfort in that."

There *is* a time for speaking. Silence has its place, but continued silence can be insulting or cruel.

Several of us have had the experience of someone we considered a friend not saying a word about a tragedy in our lives. We agreed that a card or a phone call—even months later—was much better than nothing at all. In fact, receiving a note months or even a year later was sometimes especially helpful. By then others have forgotten, but for the sufferer, there can be fresh waves of sorrow.

One man told me that when he had a mental health crisis at work, his boss dropped everything and traveled several hours to be with him. He said that as he recovered, it was helpful that several people, including his wife and his grown

daughter, kept asking him insightful questions. "They didn't let me wiggle out of them, no *yes* or *no* questions and answers. They kept asking me how I was doing and they stayed to listen." He needed people to speak to him, and he appreciated every note he got. "Worst for me were the people who tip-toed around as if nothing had happened. Worst of all was a complete loss of friendship. There were people who didn't want to have anything to do with me after I had my breakdown! That hurt."

Many people voiced their appreciation for spoken prayers. "I was overwhelmed when I was going through chemo, how people came out of the woodwork to say they were praying for me and had asked their friends to pray for me too!" said one woman. "I could just feel their support. You know that expression, 'wings of prayer'? I was carried on those wings during my months of therapy!"

On the other hand, another woman confided, "to be honest, when people say they'll pray for me, I feel a little looked down on, and I always wonder if they just say that to show how religious they are. But there was one woman at work who asked if she could pray with me, right then and there! I was nervous but also touched. It felt good to hear her out-loud prayer—and she kept it short for me!"

FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

People struggle and people grieve and people heal at their own rate, in their own time, or better, in God's time. There's a story 3,000 years old about King David, who agonizes over his son's illness, but then washes his face and is clearly ready to move on with life as soon as his child dies (See 2 Samuel 12:16–20). David was operating on a very different schedule than his courtiers and servants thought proper, but it made sense for him.

For everything there is a season. And as sisters in Christ, we can take comfort in knowing that God will bless our efforts, silent and spoken, to reach out to others "with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God." And what if one of us accidentally says a "no-good, very bad" thing? Ah, then we remember that God is the God of forgiveness and new grace in our human relationships.

Remember the lady who made the comment about the man in the casket looking better than he did at the anniversary party? She and her widowed friend enjoyed many more years of good friendship and forgiving laughter. 🌸

Christa von Zychlin and her husband, Wayne Nieminen, are pastors of Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hartland, Wisconsin.

breathing in

the big questions

by Gwen Sayler



my yoga instructor has taught me a lot about the healing power of a good belly laugh. When we are anxious or fearful, our abdominal muscles constrict, our lungs feel congested, and our breathing becomes more and more shallow—all of which, of course, raises our anxiety even higher. A belly laugh reverses all this. In a belly laugh, our breath deepens, tense abdominal muscles relax, and congestion gives way to contentment. Breathing deeply connects us to our core, centering and calming our conflicted spirits as we laugh.

Pondering the theme of suffering introduced in this month's Bible study, I was drawn to a dusty notebook that had been untouched for some 20 years—the journal where I recorded my memories of my mother's dying years. Feeling my breath grow short and my abdominal muscles tense, I opened the notebook and began to read.

What I discovered surprised me greatly. I expected to re-live suffocating memories of suffering. Instead, I received a gift: a breath-taking witness to the healing power of the belly laugh of faith even in the midst of unrelieved suffering.

Letting go of the pre-set answers

In 1982 my mother, Bette, was diagnosed with third-stage ovarian cancer. The cancer had spread and the surgeons were unable to remove

much of it, making her prognosis extremely poor. A woman of steely reserve, my mother listened quietly to visitors who tried to make sense of her suffering by connecting it somehow to God's gracious will. "Your cancer is part of God's good plan for you." "Be strong—God is using this to test your faith." "God never gives us more than we can bear—what a testimony to how strong your faith is!" Breathing laboriously through the tube that fed extra oxygen to her, my mother responded by smiling and thanking the visitors for coming.

Her calm exterior, however, belied her growing anger at what she considered pre-set answers that gave the comforters a way to stifle their *own* long-buried questions and fears by holding their breath against them. It was a technique she herself had mastered in the past. Now, however, she was ready to let out her breath and see where the journey would lead her.

A life-long Bible reader, my mother had been taught that as the inspired word of God, the Bible has answers for every question in life—a sort of "driver's manual for the soul." Repeatedly warned that challenging even one answer would lead her down the slippery slope to unbelief, she had always stifled the questions she really wanted to ask. Now, driven by the need for spiritual breath sufficient to sustain

her in her struggle, she breathed into all those questions by saying them aloud and bringing them to her daily Bible reading.

No longer constricted by pre-set answers, my mother discovered in a new way the witness of biblical ancestors breathing into their own fearful questions, faithful folk gasping in psalms and laments for breath sufficient to sustain them in their struggles. From them she gained freedom to let God know how she really felt, to join the psalmist in “flooding her bed with tears” (Psalm 6:6). She learned to distance herself from those whose insistence on clear-cut answers stifled any fresh air that opening up the questions might stir. She learned to ask for what she needed from trusted co-travelers on the journey.

Drawn with the saints before her to the cross and Jesus’ dying gasp, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” my mother experienced in a new way the rest of the story, the breath-taking breaking news: “He is not here, he is risen.”

Breathing deeply into her questions all the way to the cross and empty tomb centered and calmed her spirit, expanding her spiritual airways to hear and participate in a new way in the joyous belly laugh of faith. Once she stopped holding her breath against the questions she wanted to ask, she was able to laugh in a way she never had been able to before.

Traveling into the questions

After two years of declining health, my mother asked me to come home to accompany her on what we both knew would be her final journey to the hospital. Her abdomen so distended that she could barely breathe, she spent her last hours at home sharing how laughing the belly laugh of faith had expanded her horizons in what for her were breath-taking ways.

Having grown up when Lutherans and Roman Catholics were taught to regard each other’s faith traditions as simply wrong, my mother was delightfully surprised that the two friends most willing to travel with her into her questions were Roman Catholics, Hilda and Helen. Both had lost sons to cancer. Having lived their own questions, they allowed my mother the freedom to breathe into hers. Neither offered answers; both were willing to sit patiently with her and allow her to journey at her own pace. Their company expanded my mother’s horizons, convincing her that many of the differences that are so often used to divide us are in reality gifts intended to be shared with one another.

Laughing the belly laugh of faith also expanded my mother’s openness to change within her own tradition. Veteran of many battles over how things should be done in the church, she was surprised to discover that breathing into her own questions freed her to let go of the need to say “but we’ve always done it this way.”

Sensing that the next generation’s world would be far different from hers, she was persuaded that holding onto old ways after their time has passed constricts the breath rather than deepens it. With her expanded vision, she became convinced that the journey we share is too precious to squander in dividing ourselves simply for the sake of avoiding change. The belly laugh of faith frees us to hold on to what is really necessary and to let go of the rest.

Finding the space to breathe

After reflecting on what she had learned on her journey, it was time for my mother’s final trip to the hospital. Before leaving the house, she stood before her family pictures, smiling and saying good-bye, picture by picture, to her children, her daughter-in-law, and the young grandsons who were the joy of her heart. Then, after a quiet good-bye to the house itself, she got into the car and drove away without looking back.

By this time her body was so congested and constricted that her breathing was dangerously shallow. Her spirit, however, was calm and centered. Breathing into the questions she had feared to ask for so long had opened space for the Spirit’s breath to enliven her in new and surprising ways. Relaxed and confident in her core, she would die a woman at peace.

My final conversations with my mother took place in her hospital

room. Her world had narrowed to that room and the oxygen tube that helped her breathe. As she reminisced about all she had experienced in the last few years, she began to chuckle.

"So many funny things have happened," she said. "Write about them someday. Tell about all the funny things." By "funny" she did not mean "entertaining" or "amusing." She was talking about the unexpected eruptions of the belly laugh of faith that had given her courage and confidence on a journey she had never imagined or wanted to take. By witnessing to the breath-taking power of that laugh, she wanted to invite others traveling at different paces to different places in their journeys to breathe deeply into their questions in hope rather than holding their breath in fear. My mother came to believe that the preciousness of the journey we are privileged to share is far more important than the differences that divide us. She wanted to tell how her mind had changed about what life in community with one another is all about.

The belly laugh of faith

We buried my mother next to my father just before Holy Week in 1985. One of her last requests had been that in lieu of a household auction, we would ask her friend Claudia to distribute the furnishings to any of

the town's residents who could use them. Despite the many differences separating them, my mother and Claudia had forged a deep friendship as co-travelers on divergent paths through different kinds of suffering. Asked to meet my sister-in-law at the house on Easter Sunday afternoon, Claudia arrived expecting a cake pan as a memento. She departed with much, much more.

As the women loaded the pickup truck, they told each other "Bette stories" and in the re-telling began laughing together the belly laugh of faith. By evening, the distribution was complete. The packing that had begun in mourning ended in Easter celebration. It was a fitting conclusion to the years my parents had lived as co-travelers with people both very similar to and different from them in that little town on the prairie.

Life has not gotten any simpler in the 20 years since my mother died. If anything, it seems more precarious than ever. Terrorist threats, rising prices, declining health-care coverage—the fear-factor barometer continues to rise, constricting our breath, threatening to elevate our anxiety to full alert. In times like these, we are tempted to hold our breath against our fears and dismiss those whose breathing pattern challenges ours.

The (breath) blessing of the Spirit

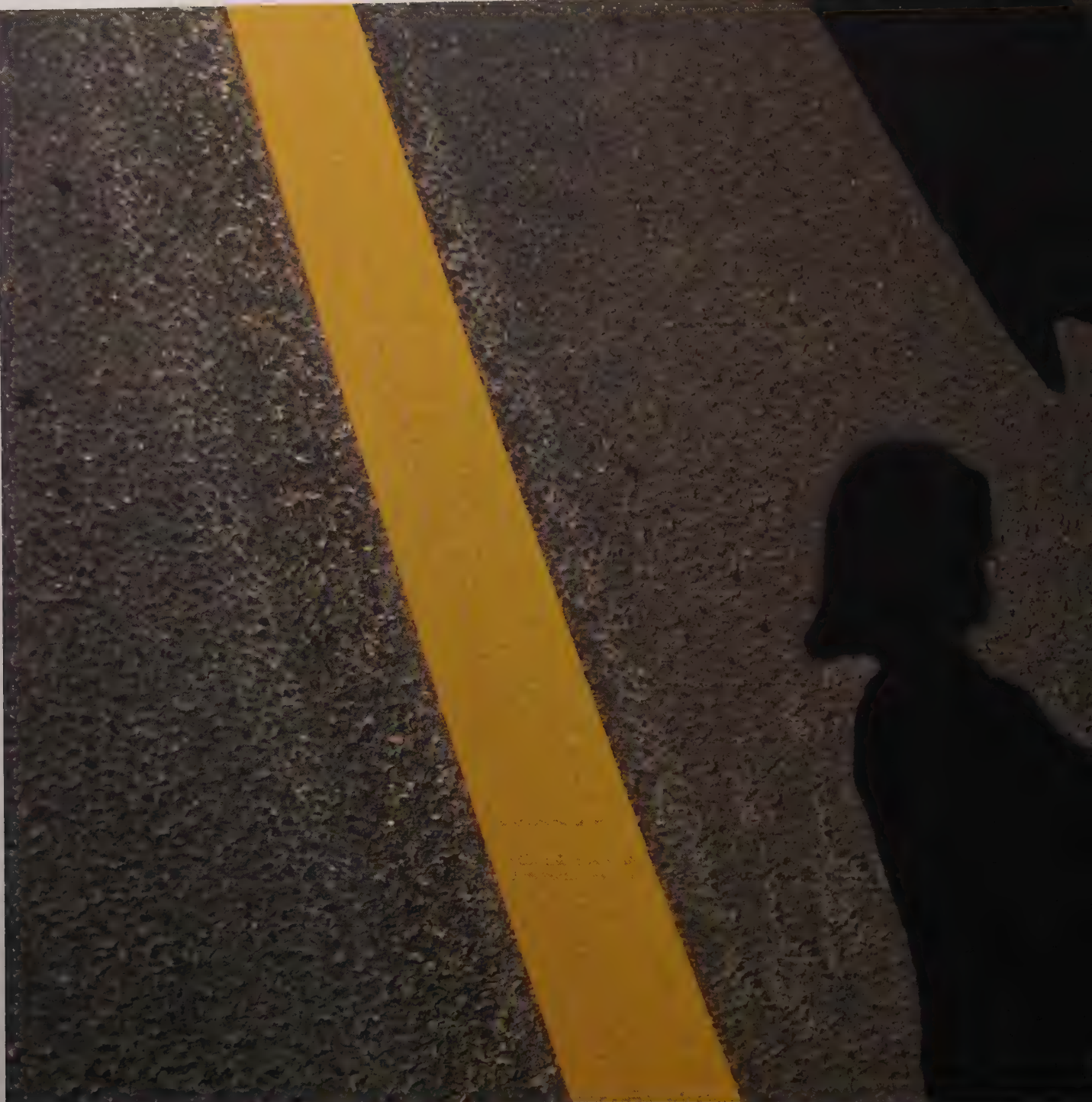
The Bible study we begin this

month offers a wonderful opportunity to let go of the breath we're tempted to hold so tightly and to be open to where the journey will lead. Drawn to the cross and empty tomb by the witness of our biblical ancestors breathing into their questions, we will be invited to breathe into ours. We can trust that the inbreathing Holy Spirit will enliven us in new and surprising ways.

As I close the notebook recording my memories of my mother's dying years, I visualize the sun setting across the vast prairie expanse on the Easter after her death. In many ways, her little town with its mixture of people and furniture so similar to and so different from one another is an image of the communities in which we live. I imagine the Spirit of God breathing a blessing on her town and on all of the communities through which we travel on our ways.

The blessing of the Spirit provides the oxygen we need to open our spiritual airways, expand our horizons, center and calm our hearts, and connect us to our own core and to one another. Breathe in. Breathe deeply. Be open. You never know when you will relax in an unexpected eruption of the belly laugh of faith! 🌿

Gwen Sayler is professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. The town of which she writes is Underwood, N.D.



by Martha E. Stortz

THE GOOD T

Several years ago a rabbi wrote a book that became an im



HAT COMES

the best-seller: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

continued on page 24

If people read the psalms, they could have saved themselves the cost. The psalmist asks the rabbi's question in reverse: "Why do the wicked prosper?" Good things happen to bad people; bad things happen to good people. My question combines these two inescapable facts of human existence: "Can any good come of suffering?"

I begin with a piece of bumper-sticker wisdom, too earthy for direct quote and best paraphrased as "excrement occurs." When we create it, we try to sanitize and scoop it out of sight. But when it happens to us—look out! We rage against the dying of the light, against the suffering of the innocents, against a world that has infant mortality and cancer, war and grinding poverty. Newspaper headlines do not support the theory of intelligent design. Either the Creator had a screw loose or we have fallen far from an intended perfection. I think it's the second, and that makes my question more urgent: "Can any good come of suffering?"

If you are the one suffering, this is no abstract question. If we have a toothache, the world shrinks to the size of that toothache. Imagine the concentrated pain of chronic illness, debilitating disease, or the daily pang of hunger. What good can

come of this kind of suffering?

A dying friend offered an answer. He faced his final days with such equanimity and grace, it scared me. "How do you do it?" I demanded, full of the anger I thought he should be feeling. "I'm in good company," he said, and handed me a note he had received from one of his friends: "The wood of the cross is the tree of life."

GOD SUFFERS WITH US. THAT MAY NOT SEEM LIKE ENOUGH—BUT DEATH IS NOT THE LAST WORD.

The passion and death of Jesus carved the path he found himself on. Not only had the trail been blazed, but my friend had the best of traveling companions. My friend found that the good that came of his suffering was a Good that suffered with him. It didn't always ease his pain, but my friend never felt alone. Even when he feared God had forgotten about him, he clung to Jesus' cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1) Someone had already experienced his darkest moments—and was there in the darkness with him.

TRAVELING COMPANIONS

During Holy Week a pastor reminded his congregation: "Pay attention to the psalms each day. We know the plot-line of the Passion by heart. But if we want to know what was on the mind of Jesus, all we have to do is pray the psalms." Jesus himself found a traveling companion in the psalmist: The psalms appointed for those dark days between Palm Sun-

day and Holy Saturday give voice to his suffering. More powerfully, they show all of us God's presence with us in despair, suffering with us. Finally, the story ends, not at the cross on Friday but at the empty tomb. The apostle Paul's promise to the Christians at Rome rings

both powerful and true: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5).

On Easter Sunday we shout with conviction: "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" If we believed Paul's words, we could add the names of all of our dearly departed. "Harriette is risen! She is risen indeed!" "Dad is risen! He is risen indeed!" One good that comes to those who suffer is the certain knowledge that the Good comes to them, wrapping them in resurrection. This is most certainly true!

Consider the caregivers. Can any good come of their suffering? For if we care for someone who suffers, we become co-sufferers. Caregivers become an extension of those who suffer. We feel what they feel; we hurt when they hurt. I heard familiar vows afresh from a friend whose wife was dying. As she slowly wasted away, he lost weight and gained wrinkles. His friends fretted and finally intervened. He quoted Scripture at us: "We are one flesh," just like the Bible says. Maybe I gave her a bad rib. . . ." It's no surprise that widows and widowers, parents and partners of people who've suffered chronic disease often succumb themselves to some illness after their beloved has died. Exhaustion weakens their immune system, but spiritually they are bound by love to the one who has died.

MOTHER OF SORROWS

A one-flesh union binds mother and child. In cultures and centuries with high infant mortality rates, the *mater dolorosa* (the Sorrowful Mother) takes on huge significance. These images feature Mary, the mother of Jesus, clad in black and weeping. I saw Mary's tears in the face of a young mother at her newborn child's deathbed. She looked as if the air was being sucked out of her, breath by breath. The two, mother and child, had been room-

mates, had shared residence in her body for almost nine months. "I feel ripped apart," she said, and her words vividly describe the way many co-sufferers feel. When a beloved child or spouse dies, caregivers become amputees. Tethered so long to the life of another, they have grown together, sharing breath, bread, and deep love. For a long time caregivers have sensation in that missing limb: a flickering impulse from something that is no longer there.

The Portuguese language has a word for this kind of loss: *saudade*. I asked a Brazilian friend what this meant, and he gave a description rather than a definition: "It is like a mother cleaning the room of a child who has died." We all know people who keep the room of the deceased exactly as it was, hoping that the beloved will return. In her recent memoir of mourning, *A Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), writer Joan Didion remembers that she discarded none of her husband's shoes: After all, he might need them. If she threw them out, she had to admit he wasn't coming back. She hung onto those shoes. Their presence was better than the abyss of absence that opened before her.

DAILY GRACES

Didion's "magical thinking" triggered memories of my own. In

the months immediately following my husband's death, I lost things, important papers I had in hand moments before, earrings he had given me, and always the keys to our house. I spent hours frantically searching for them before shaking myself back to reality: "You haven't lost *something*; you lost *someone*. You're not going to find him because you are looking for someone who is not here any more. He's gone—none of the rest of this stuff really matters." Oddly, the realization calmed me. Invariably, I found what I'd been looking for. The peace that settled in my soul grounded me in what *did* matter: a good that comes of co-suffering.

When my husband was dying, we took our compass from spiritual truths, not the medical ones. We refused to live without joy, taking refuge instead in what I came to call "the daily graces."

As we wandered that "valley of the shadow of death," we discovered a table had been prepared for us (Psalm 23). Every day we received our daily bread. Manna fell for us, often from unexpected sources. We tried out a new recipe—and it worked. We plotted a new route for the daily walk—and it was beautiful. Friends brought an entire Thanksgiving dinner to our doorstep—in July.

At night we counted our blessings; there were many. On the

worst days, we laughed: “The best thing that happened today—was that it ended.” Those awful days were actually few in number. We were being tutored in the daily graces. Along with the great love of family and friends, the little things sustained us.

The daily graces are goods that come to caregivers. God holds them, and God holds them in the only way God can: through gifts of laughter and imagination, the love of family and friends, the beauty of God’s good creation, and the kindness of the neighbor. This is most certainly true!

THE SUFFERING WE CAUSE

Finally, consider the suffering we cause. “Excrement occurs” because we all contribute our share. I’m not talking only about genocide, rape, and the atrocities of war. Rather I refer to those smaller, festering injuries that we inflict on others and on ourselves: a grudge gone on way too long, a harsh word, gossip masquerading as “Christian concern,” failure to forget an injury done, and that chronic lack of self-esteem that invites us to underestimate and discount the impact of our actions on other people.

While these more minor, personal faults pale in comparison to the death of a child, they kill by inches. They are as corrosive as cancer—and can be fatal over time.

Experiencing suffering, directly or indirectly, makes us aware of the suffering we create, another good that comes in the wake of pain. For we *suffer* the suffering we inflict on others. A daughter had not spoken to her mother in months, punishing her for a callous remark. “It really hurt me that she would still say that,” the daughter said, “but I realized the silence hurt more than the slight.” She phoned her mother to re-establish contact, only to discover that her mother had been trying to figure out how to reconnect. They reconciled, promising not to let so much time pass by next time. Each knew there would probably be a “next time,” but now both had a way of negotiating.

In a more political context, two families in the Middle East, one Israeli and one Palestinian, both lost young sons to the ongoing violence in their shared land. Instead of seeking revenge, they bonded to create an organization that would work toward peace by eliminating prejudice. Forgiveness got the project rolling. The families had to forgive the soldiers who’d inadvertently killed their sons; they had to forgive their enemies; they had to forsake the natural instinct for revenge.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, forgiveness is unnatural; everything in us strains for retaliation. Therefore, we beg for forgiveness daily. Indeed, in the Lord’s Prayer, we

request forgiveness immediately after we ask for the daily graces:

“Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. . . .”

Daily they come: forgiveness, along with daily bread; manna from heaven, along with forgiveness. Forgiveness is the good that comes to those who cause suffering. It comes with our daily bread, and it is as vital to our everyday flourishing. This is most certainly true!

One of my locker-room buddies snapped her towel at no one in particular. “You believe in Jesus,” and her words were an accusation. “Where is God in Darfur?”

Here’s what I wanted to tell her. God doesn’t give us an explanation for suffering; God gives us God’s Son. The good that comes of suffering is a Good that suffers with the ravaged villages and raped women in Darfur, with the dying and terminally ill, and with those who grieve. God suffers with us. That may not seem like enough—but death is not the last word. We hear God’s final word in the Easter proclamation: “He is risen!”

He is risen indeed. 🌿
Martha E. Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., and the author of *A World According to God* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Your Gifts Lighten the Load

Terri Lackey

Sometimes God calls

you to one area of work, recognizes your potential, and broadens the assignment.

At least that's what happened to Gabrielle Saunders-Hudecek, recipient of the Amelia Kemp Opportunity Scholarship for Women of Color. A single mother of four, student at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, and executive secretary for the Southern Ohio Synod, Saunders-Hudecek is among 42 women who were awarded 2006–2007 scholarships from Women of the ELCA. Your generosity helps bold women accept their calls to serve the church.

A survivor of domestic violence, Saunders-Hudecek entered seminary in 2003 “with the notion that God was calling me to counsel women who are experiencing or who have experienced domestic violence.”

“I wanted a theological education as a foundation, in order to affirm that I had the tools and credentials, not simply the experiences, to reach out to women like me,” she said. “And more importantly, I wanted to be a witness to God’s grace and forgiveness, and to the Lord’s love for me and my oppressor and all humankind.”

In October 2005, when Saunders-Hudecek attended an ecumenical conference in Brazil sponsored by the Conference of International Black Lutherans, she “realized then that my calling was much broader.”

She felt God calling her to minister to people of color in the United States and other countries “who have suffered the

injustices of racism, classism, and sexism.”

She said she hopes to help “bridge the gap with people of color and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” and to facilitate mutual appreciation of each other’s “gifts of cultural, racial, and spiritual diversity in God’s world house.”

Saunders-Hudecek, a member of Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, Ohio, thanked the Women of the ELCA



Gabrielle Saunders-Hudecek with three of her four children. From left: Morgan, 11; Gary, 15; and Taylor, 11. Son Shaun, 24, is not pictured. Gabrielle is a member of Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, Ohio.

for its “generosity and kindness” and for “lightening her financial burden” so that she might continue her seminary studies and reach the goals God has called her to.

Thanks to your contributions, 42 women received a total of \$48,350 through seven scholarship categories. That’s up from last year when your gifts of \$30,000 helped 35 women. The scholarship program is just one way Women of the ELCA carries out its purpose statement to affirm and support women’s gifts and growth.

The scholarships support a diverse group of women, including second-career

students, seminarians, female college faculty, and professional women on the road to career advancement. These women represent various fields of study such as lay ministry, ordination, child development, social work, health sciences, and teaching. Some are in their undergraduate work, others will attend their final year of seminary, and some graduated from high school 10 or more

years ago and are just now beginning their higher education.

Women selected for scholarships are age 21 or over and represent every region in the ELCA, according to Emily Hansen, associate for programs, Women of the ELCA. Many scholarship recipients live and work in extraordinary circumstances as they pursue their educational and career goals.

Two of the scholarship categories reached a historic goal, according to Hansen. The Chilstrom Ordination Scholarship had six recipients, and the Amelia Kemp scholarship for women of color had five recipients. "That's the most recipients in our history for both categories," she said. 🌸

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.

2006-2007 SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS BY FUND AND SYNODICAL REGION

Ordained Ministry Scholarship supported by the Chilstrom Fund

Assists women who are second-career students at ELCA seminaries preparing for ordained ministry in ELCA congregations.

Sandra Burroughs (9B)
Dundee, Iowa
Ordination
Wartburg Seminary

Andrea Dobberman (8G)
Conroe, Texas
Ordination
Wartburg Seminary

Kristin Neitzel (5K)
Longmont, Colo.
Ordination
Wartburg Seminary

Arlene Okey (8H)
Sardis, Ohio
Ordination
Trinity Lutheran Seminary

Sue Shanks (5B)
Harvard, Ill.
Ordination
Wartburg Seminary

Shannon Witt (3C)
Bellevue, Iowa
Ordination
Wartburg Seminary

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BIBLE STUDY

HOPE IN GOD IN TIMES OF SUFFERING SESSION 1

Making Sense of Suffering

by Terry and Faith Fretheim

TEXTS USED IN THIS SESSION

Psalm 22:1–2	Isaiah 63:15–19
Jeremiah 12:1	Isaiah 64:8–12
Psalm 13:1–2	Job 23:1–10
Mark 15:34	Job 42:7–8
Judges 6:12–13	Psalm 139
Luke 1:26–34	
Psalm 77:1–10	

Overview

Welcome to the 2006–2007 *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study! Our plan in this study is to bring up and discuss a variety of different perspectives on suffering. Each session is filled with information, probing questions, and Bible passages to examine further. Each session is only the beginning of reflection, conversation, and prayer for you to carry with you until the next session.

In this first session we focus on the overuse of the word *suffering*, the variety of ways people try to

explain suffering, and some questions people and the Bible raise about suffering. And we touch briefly on several types of suffering.

Theme verse

Psalm 22:1–2

A Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Opening

Hymn “Healer of Our Every Ill”
(*With One Voice* 738)

Prayer

Who’s here today?

Introduce yourself, and if you feel comfortable doing so, name something about suffering that bothers you, puzzles you, or absolutely angers you.

Suffering: A fact of life

Suffering is a fact of life. Every one of us suffers at some time. Certainly, in any community one would care to name—including your own community—there is pain and grief enough for the world.

Just think for a minute about people you know. Think of yourself.

At the same time, suffering is not evenly distributed among people. Some of us suffer much more than others.

Again, think of people you know.

Think of yourself and your family.

Some suffering is debilitating. Some people experience terrible suffering, including solid Christians.

Once more, think of people you know.

And then, think of yourself and your family.

Other people, Christians and others, seem to escape from the harsh realities of life. And we wonder with Jeremiah 12:1, “Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all the treacherous thrive?”

Some suffering has a great impact on the community, not just individuals. Think of the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita last year.

> Has your community experienced this kind of suffering? What are some examples?

Let's look at the word *suffering*.

Might it be that we use the word *suffering* too easily? We use it for everything from a headache to the Holocaust. But distinctions must be made between, for example, the discomfort of a broken arm, the heartbreak of losing a loved one to the recklessness of a drunk driver, and communal suffering that is of such a magnitude that it can hardly be fathomed—such as the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, or the tsunami in Southeast Asia, or the genocide in Rwanda and Sudan, or Hurricane Katrina.

We need to find a way to speak of suffering in more precise ways. To that end, these sessions will focus on some general matters about suffering:

Making distinctions among types of suffering,
Discussing the root causes of suffering, and
Sharing ways that the word *suffering* might be used in our daily lives.

Also, two personal questions will be raised and considered throughout these studies (if you prefer not to focus on yourself, you might think of someone you know):

> What is one cause or source of your suffering?
This question will help sort out types of suffering.
> What will you do with your suffering, whether or

not you know the cause?

So let's begin our journey of exploring the relationship between God and suffering. And as we journey together, let us bring our beliefs, questions, joys, angers, and laments into the circle. While this study can certainly be completed alone, it will be enriched by the shared stories and faithful wisdom of a group.

Questions raised in the face of suffering

As you reflect on your suffering and the suffering of others, remember that the Bible is filled with questions about suffering, and many of the questions are addressed to God. Such key figures as Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah sharply question God about the suffering they experience or anticipate. Christians do not experience suffering or think about suffering in isolation from the God in whom we believe. At the same time, we often wonder what God has to do with the suffering we experience. We often ask such questions as: Where is God in these times of suffering?

> What have been your questions in times of suffering?

> Were you comfortable in asking those questions?

> Did you include those questions in your prayers to God?

> Take a few minutes to think about God and your prayers in times of suffering.

Are any of the questions you (or others) have asked in a time of suffering like these examples from the Bible? Ask a member of the group to read the first text on the next page aloud. After she reads it, pause to ponder it for a moment, silently and then in conversation. Then move on to the next text.

Were your questions like this lament from Psalm 13:1-2?

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

Perhaps Psalm 22:1-2 rings a bell with you:
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Jesus in his suffering used this psalm in wondering about the presence of God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34)

Maybe Gideon's question is like yours (Judges 6:12-13):

"The angel of the LORD appeared to [Gideon] and said to him, 'The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior.' Gideon answered him, 'But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?'"

Jeremiah, who is faithful to God, cries out in his suffering that people who are not faithful often prosper (Jeremiah 12:1). Have you ever asked a question like this? "Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?"

Even faithful, trusting Mary asks a question of the angel who announces that she will bear a son. Have you ever asked a "how can this be" question? "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:26-34)

From these texts, it is clear that the Bible knows about suffering on the part of both individuals and communities. Indeed, the Bible speaks directly of suffering (among many other examples, see Psalm 77:1-10; Isaiah 63:15-19 and 64:8-12). In a later session, we shall see that Job confronts God with

many questions. He challenges God about his situation (for example, Job 23:1-10). At the end of the book, God calls Job's questioning "right" (Job 42:7-8). The Bible is filled with challenging questions addressed to God about suffering and evil.

The why question

A key question that often arises in connection with suffering is: Why? The Bible helps us make several distinctions about this question. They are sketched below; in later sessions we will consider this topic at length.

The "Why?" questions are meaningful even if we have no specific explanation or answer. And so, for example, asking "Why?" about a child's suffering may inspire a medical researcher to search for its source, leading to breakthroughs in understanding the illness and perhaps even the discovery of an effective treatment or preventative. Remember the suffering caused by polio and how the disease has been nearly eradicated. Dr. Jonas Salk asked, "Why?"

Making sense of suffering? Let's begin

As we were writing this study, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. We continued to hear news of battles and bombings in Iraq. Palestine and Israel were trying to work out a settlement to divide the land that is so holy to three faiths. An earthquake ravaged Kashmir. Riots broke out in France. And it was the fourth anniversary of the attacks of September 11.

These events and the intense suffering associated with them came right into our living rooms via television. We saw the suffering of individuals and of communities. Yes, we can turn off the TV. Do we? Did we? Do those of us who are "safe" feel the need to be involved by watching as events unfold? Is that the extent of our involvement, watching and staying current? Does watching suffering on televi-

sion lead us to do more on behalf of others? Or does it lead to overload and then avoidance for the sake of our own well-being?

Perhaps you have been affected directly by one or another of these events or their aftereffects. If so, you will have much to share, especially when we talk about what we do about our own suffering.

Much of the suffering we see around us is not preventable. Hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes are not preventable and strike with little warning. Other causes of suffering are preventable or at least predictable.

➤ **Whether we can or cannot predict or prevent suffering, shouldn't we, as Christians, find some way of entering into the suffering of others in ways that cost us more than a walk across the room to turn on the television? What are some ways we can do that?**

➤ **What activities might we engage in so that there is less suffering in our world? What can we do about the suffering we see around us?**

➤ **Or, closer to home, all of us will experience suffering in some way. A key question becomes: What will we do with our own suffering?**

What about God?

Christians believe that God is present with us in our suffering. But questions abound as to just how God is involved in our sufferings.

Consider these questions. We'll talk about them a little later.

• Is God responsible for creating a world where there is suffering?

• Does God *cause* suffering?

• Does God *allow* suffering?

• If God allows suffering, is that any different from saying that God causes suffering?

• Is sin *always* the cause of suffering?

• Is sin *often* the cause?

• Is God present in our suffering but at times powerless to prevent suffering?

• Is it God's will that we suffer?

• What is the relationship between prayer and suffering?

• Does God suffer and, if so, what difference might that make?

• Christians understand that the suffering and death of Jesus is central to our faith. And yet how does his suffering relate to our suffering?

These are only some of the questions that people raise in the face of suffering. The ways we answer these questions for ourselves can have positive or negative effects in our response to the suffering in people's lives.

For example, a church member once told a mother whose son had just died in an accident in a ski resort parking lot: "Someday you will know what you did to cause this to happen." The mother never set foot in a church again! That insensitive remark left a scar—we might call it church-caused scar tissue. Such a condition is borne by many a person who has turned away from the church. In other words, our responses to people who are suffering can have a great impact on their relationship to God and the church. Our response to the suffering of others can send them away or invite them in. It matters what we say in response to the suffering in people's lives. It matters a lot!

Do you have such an experience you might be willing to share?

Explanations of suffering

Christians can say some things that are helpful in the face of suffering, but we cannot say everything, or even as much as we might like to say. We cannot explain suffering or resolve the problem of evil or

provide answers to these issues. Yet people certainly try. Here are some examples of how people try to explain suffering:

Some people claim that all suffering is the will of God (or sent by God). Yet, as we shall see, much suffering is against the will of God. When people break the commandments (for example, by stealing from someone), they act against the will of God. The suffering that results from their action is against the will of God.

Some claim that no suffering is the will of God. However, as we shall see, some suffering is indeed the will of God for us. Think of Mother Teresa or others like her who enter into and share the suffering of others; in doing so, they suffer. Aren't we called by God to enter into the lives of others who are suffering? Wouldn't that mean that, in such cases, suffering is the will of God for us?

Some claim that all suffering is due to sin. Hence, we may think that suffering is something someone deserved. We have all heard people say, "They must be suffering because of some sin they committed." But, as we shall see, many people who suffer have done nothing to deserve it (consider, for example, the suffering of an abused child).

There is a variation on this theme: People who suffer are often poor or in some way disadvantaged. Think of the suffering associated with Hurricane Katrina. The poor seemed to suffer more than those who were better off.

Some have suggested that these people suffered because they had done something to deserve it. Yet, as we shall see in this study, much suffering is not due to anything that the sufferer has done; rather, it comes from their being wronged or neglected by others.

Some claim that all suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs. Yet, as we shall see, some suffering is good. This does not mean that people should be masochists, seeking suffering wherever it can be found. Suffering can be good, but only if it contributes to a better life. Think of the hard work of physical therapy after an accident.

Some claim that all suffering is to bear the cross. And so, for example, someone might say: "I have a bad back; it is my cross to bear." But, as we shall see, the language of cross-bearing is really only applicable to suffering that is consciously chosen and could have been avoided. Recall Mother Teresa and other such people you know.

Some claim that all suffering is mysterious. Yet, some suffering, perhaps much suffering, is not mysterious at all. For example, if someone gets drunk and drives into a ditch or into another person, the reason for the suffering is clear. But other suffering is truly a mystery.

Some claim that God allows suffering. The word *allow*, however, can have two meanings. People may say that God "allows" a specific instance of suffering to occur. This is really no different from saying that God caused or sent the suffering. On the other hand, one could speak more generally and say that God "allows" suffering to occur in the world; as we shall see, this is a more helpful way to think about suffering.

Some claim that suffering is due to God's absence. We have all heard people cry out: "Where was God?" (see Psalm 22:1). But while it may seem at such times that God is absent, the Christian can confidently claim that God is present in every situation in life, even in times of deepest suffering (see Psalm 139).

Christians have important things to say about suffering

While Christians finally cannot explain suffering, we need not be reduced to silence. The Bible has many resources for our thinking and speaking about the pains and sorrows of life. Indeed, the Bible gives its readers room to speak between silence and explanation. The Bible does not, however, propose that there is only one right thing to say to someone who is suffering. We need to discern carefully what words might be appropriate in view of that person's situation. At the least, biblical perspectives can rule out those explanations we discussed above.

Root causes of suffering

Suffering is a fact of life. Every one of us suffers at some time. However, there are different types of suffering according to their root causes, and we will outline some of these so that we can speak more precisely. In later sessions, we will consider these varieties of suffering in more detail.

Suffering as part of God's good creation

- Suffering and human limitations
- Suffering and nature

Suffering as the consequence of sin

- Suffering as the consequence of our own sin
- Suffering as the consequence of the sins of other people
- Suffering as the effect of sin over time

Suffering as vocation

- Human vocation
- Divine vocation

In addition to the variety of root causes of suffering, we need to consider the variety of results of suffering. For example:

- The result of some suffering is joy: Labor results in the birth of a baby.
- The result of some suffering is discomfort: Breaking an arm results in wearing an itchy, uncomfortable cast for weeks.
- The result of some suffering is sorrow: The death of a loved one results in lasting grief.
- The result of some suffering is incomprehensible: The Holocaust is of such a magnitude it can barely be fathomed.

> Can you offer additional examples under each of these four categories of results of suffering?

Closing today's session

So, dear participants, as we promised at the beginning, this has been a session filled with information, probing questions, and Bible passages to examine further. You and your group didn't get it all wrapped up today? Good! We will discuss the topics we touched on today in greater detail in future sessions.

Hymn "Lord of All Hopefulness"
(*Lutheran Book of Worship* 469)

Prayer

Looking ahead to Session 2

In thinking about suffering, our understanding of the word *relationship* is crucial. What do you mean by the word *relationship*? What do you mean when you speak of your relationship with God, your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is this relationship real?

Think about what makes a *real* relationship as you prepare for Session 2. 🌿

Terry and Faith Fretheim are the authors of this year's Bible study. Terry is the Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Lutheran Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. Faith is a retired staff member of Women of the ELCA.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Celebrate our 20th in Germany

Celebrate Women of the ELCA's 20th anniversary with a "Bold Women in Motion" trip to Germany that focuses on the lives of Martin Luther, his wife, Katharina von Bora, and other figures of the Reformation. Developed with the ELCA Wittenberg Center, the trip is scheduled for April 16–30, 2007.

Plan now to go on guided tours of Berlin, Wittenberg, Torgau, Leipzig, Nimbschen, Dresden, Eisleben, Halle, Erfurt, and Eisenach. You'll visit the city where Martin Luther lived and taught for 36 years, see the ruins of Kloster Nimbschen, the convent where Katharina von Bora was a nun prior to marrying Martin Luther, visit the church where Bach served as music director, enjoy a unique Reformation-era performance by local Wittenberg women, and more.

You'll stay at some of the some of the area's finest hotels and an Augustinian monastery, and you'll travel on a four-star motor coach. Cost of the tour also includes several meals. Participants must be at least 18 years of age and physically able to walk approximately one mile.

Registration opened July 1. Space is limited. Price is based on double occupancy (single rooms available at additional cost). Find a more detailed trip itinerary and cost schedule at www.womenoftheelca.org or call Linda S. McKinsey at 800-638-3522, ext. 2497.

Making a Difference

Celebrate Lutheran World Federation Sunday with 66 million Lutherans world-

wide on October 1. Resources for your congregation can be found at www.elca.org/lwf. Remember, 66 million Lutherans do make a difference!

Join the MIF challenge

The ELCA Mission Investment Fund (MIF) has challenged Women of the ELCA to generate 1,000 new individual accounts now through December 31, 2007. If our participants meet the challenge and open individual accounts, MIF will award Women of the ELCA \$25,000 toward the 2008 Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City, Utah.

MIF offers a variety of fixed- and adjustable-rate investments. Your involvement helps new mission congregations with land purchases and building first churches, assists established congregations with additional educational space or sanctuary expansion, and aids in renovation needs of older congregations.

All you need to do is open an account with at least \$25. For more information or to complete the simple application, visit www.womenoftheelca.org and click on "Take the MIF Challenge" under Quick Links.

Mosaic Television Introduces Jesus

The ELCA's quarterly video program, Mosaic Television, offers viewers the sights and sounds of Jesus' life. *Introducing Jesus of Nazareth* was recorded in Israel and the West Bank and features interviews with ELCA pastors in northern California and southern Wisconsin.

"The topic 'Jesus of Nazareth' has

been widely covered by broadcast television outlets,” said Tim Frakes, Mosaic Television producer, ELCA Communication Services. “What sets the ELCA’s new production apart is a straightforward approach to the story.

“While others explore the historical Jesus, Jesus in the context of the Roman Empire, or Jesus and his relationship to Mary Magdalene,

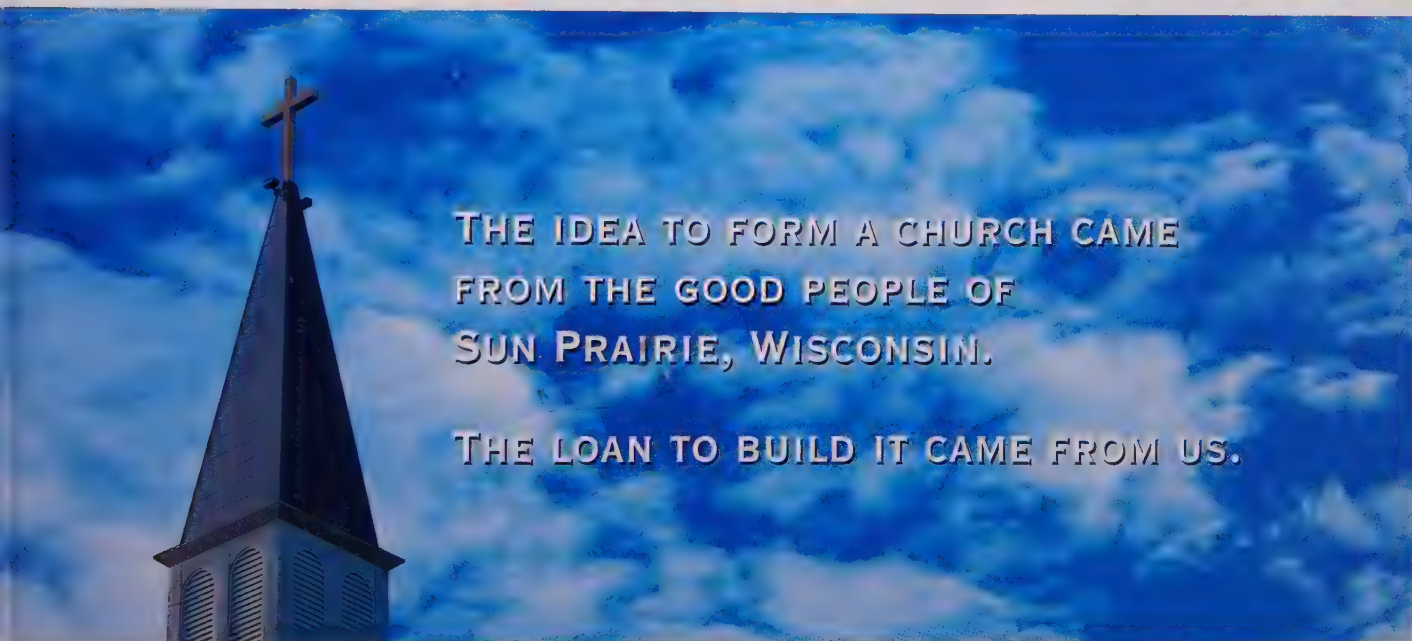
our program sticks to the four Gospels as source material,” he added. “By doing so, we hope to create an approachable introduction to more in-depth adult Bible study.”

Mosaic Television is produced by ELCA Communication Services. It is intended for educational use in a variety of congregational settings including Sunday school classes, adult forums, youth groups,

men’s and women’s groups, and new member classes.

Each issue of Mosaic Television includes a user’s guide with discussion questions.

Introducing Jesus of Nazareth can be viewed for free on the Web. It is also available in VHS and DVD formats. For more information, visit www.elca.org/mosaic or call 800-638-3522, ext. 6009. 🌸



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HEALTH WISE

The Scoop on Supplements

by Molly M. Ginty

When Jaime Hunt heard

the bad news about her anti-depressant, she didn't let it get her down.

"I take an herbal supplement called St. John's wort for depression," says Hunt, a public relations coordinator in Bloomington, Minnesota. "New research questions whether it works. But regardless of what the studies say, this herb does the job for me. Even if it's a placebo effect, I'm getting the results I want and plan to continue using it."

Like an estimated one-third of Americans, Hunt takes over-the-counter supplements that promise to promote good health. And like other supplement users, she's working to make sense of a flurry of recent studies that question these products' efficacy.

In the past year, landmark research has challenged the claims of some of the most popular herbs and supplements: glucosamine and chondroitin to ease arthritis, saw palmetto to treat enlarged prostate glands, echinacea to ward off colds, and St. John's wort for depression.

"Partially as a result of these studies, sales were down 3 percent in 2005 for the \$20 billion mass market for supplements," says Mark Blumenthal, director of the American Botanical Council, a non-profit research organization in Austin, Texas. "But those who are committed to the natural lifestyle are sticking by their trusted supplements."

As they continue popping valerian to relieve anxiety, ginkgo to boost brainpower, and ginseng for physical stamina, herb users cite older research—much of

it conducted in Europe—and their own positive experiences.

Herb enthusiasts say the St. John's wort study (done at Vanderbilt University) tested subjects with more severe depression than the herb is intended to treat. They note that the glucosamine/chondroitin study (funded by the National Institutes of Health) helped arthritis sufferers who took both supplements together, though taking them individually had little effect. They argue that the echinacea study (sponsored by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine) used one-third of the recommended dosage. And they say the saw palmetto study (at the San Francisco VA Medical Center) employed a different extraction method than the one typically used.

Who is correct in their claims—the supplement supporters or the scientists?

Consumers will get no answers from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the government agency that regulates over-the-counter supplements. The FDA doesn't investigate a supplement until someone gets sick; it has stricter standards for toothpaste. Since the passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act, which places supplements in a regulatory gray area somewhere between food and drugs, supplement labels are not allowed to make medical claims, but supplements may be sold over the counter in any amount and any form.

Because herbs and supplements aren't as carefully regulated as prescription

drugs—and because some consumers take these potent substances irresponsibly—tragedy can result. More than 150 deaths have been linked to ephedra, which the FDA banned in 2003. Unscrupulous supplement makers have sold products laced with lead, mercury, and other contaminants, prompting the FDA to call for stricter production standards and clearer labeling changes that health advocates welcome but say are still not enough to protect consumers.

Complicating the picture is the fact that herbal remedies, though some have been used for thousands of years, have not been subjected to the rigorous controlled studies that most drugs undergo.

While the world waits for more studies and the FDA continues its hands-off approach, how can you take supplements, enjoy their benefits, and stay safe?

Experts say you should start by researching any herbs you plan to try through the American Botanical Council (www.herbalgram.org), the Herb Research Foundation (www.herbs.org), or the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (<http://nccam.nih.gov>).

“Learn what you can about an herb’s toxic effects and what it doesn’t mix with,” recommends Harold Bloomfield, author of *Healing Anxiety with Herbs*. Some people have the mistaken notion that if something is natural, it’s safe in any dose. But people can have allergic reactions to herbs, and using them incorrectly can be fatal.”

Health advocates say you should

buy herbs and supplements only from companies with good track records such as Enzymatic Therapy, Nature’s Way, and Nature’s Herbs. “It’s important to find a high-quality product,” says Fredi Kronenberg, director of the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at Columbia University in New York. “Looking for the least expensive brand is probably not the best approach until the industry cleans itself up.”

The most important precaution? Keep your doctor informed. “Self-diagnosis and self-treatment can lead to self-malpractice,” says Gregory A. Plotnikoff, an associate professor of clinical medicine at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. “The best decisions are made in partnership with a physician, and periodic re-evaluation is wise.”

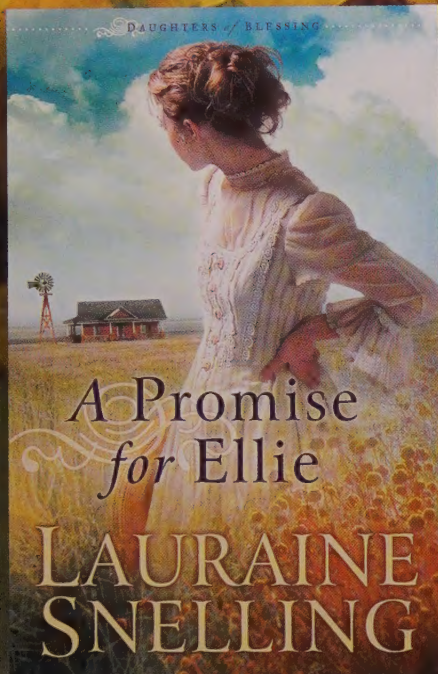
By doing their homework—and getting medical supervision—thousands of Americans are using herbal remedies and supplements successfully and safely.

“Without treatment, my osteoarthritis is so severe that I can hardly walk, sit, or stand,” says Fern-Marie Crawford, a retired administrative assistant in Spring Valley, California. “Prescription medications upset my stomach, disturb my sleep, and trigger mood swings. But glucosamine and chondroitin eliminate my pain with virtually no side effects. That’s why these supplements, for me, are the only choice that works.” 🌸

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women’s eNews*.

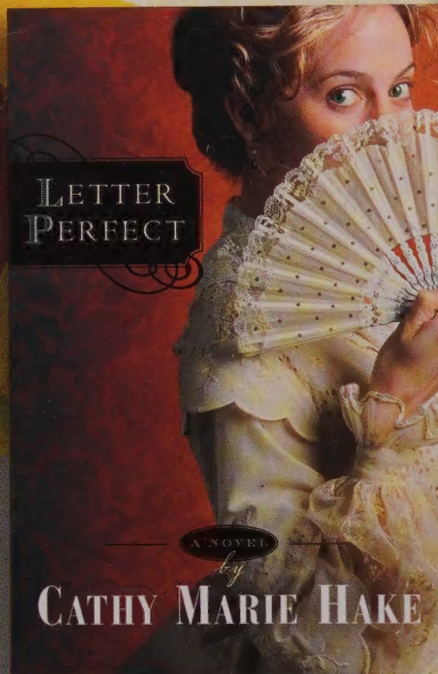
“Some people have the mistaken notion that if something is natural, it’s safe in any dose.”

Top Choices IN HISTORICAL FICTION



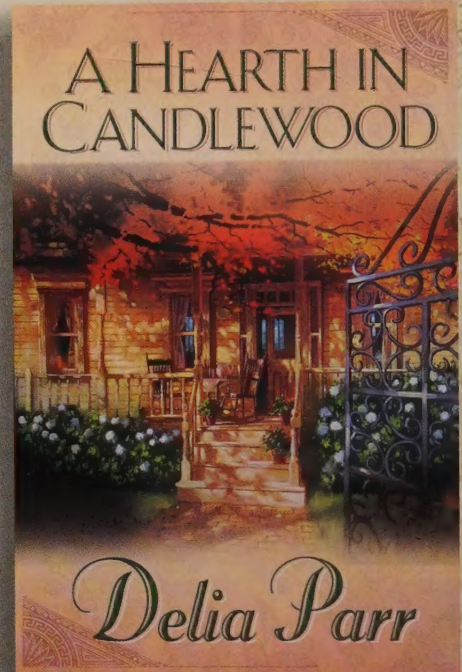
After graduating in May of 1900, Andrew Bjorklund and Ellie Wold make plans to marry once the harvest is over and their new house is finished in Blessing, North Dakota. When tragedy strikes, will they be able to keep their faith when the life they looked forward to is now unraveling?

A Promise for Ellie
DAUGHTERS OF BLESSING #1



Ruth Caldwell has always tried to live up to her mother's expectations of what a lady should be...often with less than impressive results. But when she's forced to journey west to meet the father she's never seen, she hopes that this might be the place she'll finally fit in. But her arrival brings about more mayhem than even Ruth is used to.

Letter Perfect



In the charming village of Candlewood in 1840s New York, Emma Garrett runs Hill House, a boardinghouse at the edge of town. Gifted with an uncanny ability to see the unique strengths of her guests, Emma serves and challenges them with homespun wisdom and absolute faith in God.

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RACE NOTES

Of Neck Pumpkins and Change

Linda Post Bushkofsky



One autumn, I was one

of the lucky few to receive a big, glorious neck pumpkin from my neighbor Walter's garden. I was thrilled. I baked it and froze it, nearly overrunning the freezer, and my husband and I enjoyed all manner of pumpkin dishes that winter.

Most of you are probably wondering about neck pumpkins: Neck pumpkins (*cucurbita argyrosperma*) are native to North America, perhaps domesticated in Mexico 7,000 years ago. They look more like butternut squash on steroids than round, orange Halloween pumpkins, and Pennsylvania bakers prize them because they make the best pies.

I still had some left when Lent came around. Our congregation had a Lenten tradition of Wednesday night soup suppers followed by Evening Prayer, and one week I decided to make cream of pumpkin soup. Walter was a regular at those soup suppers, so I made sure to tell him the soup was made from one of his own neck pumpkins.

Later, Walter came over to my table. I'll never forget his words: "I am 90 years old. Before tonight, I had never had cream of pumpkin soup. Tonight, when I write in my diary, I will say, 'Today I had cream of pumpkin soup, and it was very good.'"

There was Walter at 90, trying something new, something probably far removed from the pumpkin breads and pies his mother and wife had made. He tried the new soup, liked it, told the cook he liked it, and when day was done, recorded his enjoyment.

Every time I make cream of pumpkin soup, I am a little wistful—not just for one of Walter's neck pumpkins, but for the receptive spirit that allowed Walter to try something new and to celebrate it.

Women of the ELCA will stagnate and die if we fail to embrace that receptive spirit. We need to be open to new possibilities. We need to take some risks, to move beyond the familiar vegetable soup and try the cream of pumpkin. The flexibility to try new things is found in our governing documents; we need only embrace it.

I'm not talking about change just for its own sake. I'm talking about change for the sake of our organization's mission, that is, mobilizing women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

Join with me as we begin a new program year, and try at least one new thing each month. It might be as simple as a new hymn, a new meeting night or time, or a new service project. It can be as invigorating as inviting a different new woman to your group each month. It can be as energizing as discerning God's latest call to you to act boldly.

There's a little café down the street from our house near Chicago. About this time each year, they add some special fall items to the menu. My favorite is pumpkin pecan pancakes served with cinnamon butter. I'm pretty sure Walter would have enjoyed them. 🍂

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Trusting in Mysteries

by Catherine Malotky

God, you are so wise and wonder-full. You are a creator without parallel. If you could fashion a sunset, a hummingbird's muscles, and our ability to use words—all such marvels—then why suffering? What is its part in your amazing creation?

Our Buddhist cousins promote detachment. Suffering, they say, comes because we try to hold on to temporal things—things that were never meant to be clung to because they will pass away. That is a way of thinking, even wise, and one well honed by thousands of years of attention by millions of people.

However, I have not been socialized to detach. I am an American woman, surrounded by a culture of consumption. Because I and most of my peers have resources, I do not know suffering as many in the world do. I have plenty to eat, more than enough to wear, and live in a relatively safe place, secure in a home I love.

In fact, many of us can live with the illusion that we have some control over our lives, that we have earned our advantage through hard work more than luck, and that we can expect within reason to be happy. We may even think that our resources—money, social connections, education, ancestry, intelligence—will spare us suffering.

To a degree, we are spared. So many of our sisters are not. Iraqi mothers grieve their children, killed by sectarian violence or lost to a hateful distortion of the faith they have so loved. Ugandan women see their children feverish

with malaria, dying for lack of a little money for medicine. In some places, nearly-grown daughters go off to find work, only to be lured into sexual slavery. Rwandan mothers tried to protect their children from the machetes driven by ethnic hatred, but could not. Jewish mothers tried to hide their children from the Nazis, but too often saw them die.

In comparison, we North American women are spared. Though our resources shield us to some extent, we are not utterly immune from suffering. We still lose our children to accident or disease or warfare. We or others we love can be stricken, health or well-being lost. We have now tasted terrorism and, like our foremothers, natural disaster.

How does this square with you, God, one who loves us beyond imagining? Dare we call to you, even when you and your love seem so far away? Can we cry out, even demand your return? Will you shut us out as faithless? Worse, are you a cruel teacher, who makes suffering the prerequisite to growth? Or are you simply capricious and we merely your playthings?

Your people have imagined all of these as we have tried to make sense of our suffering. Like all of your children, I yearn to understand. Give me patience, God. Quiet me so I can listen and learn from you. Help me trust in you even as I walk in your mysteries. Amen. 🌿

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.